

CHAPTER 144

September 13, 2011

“Hey, did you see the show on TV last night? Naoto-kun was on!”

Everyone had been walking to school that morning when they all just happened to conveniently walk into each other. Guess they just all left at the right time that they’d meet on the road to school or something. However that brilliant stroke of luck worked, everyone was there, save Kanji, with word of the news report on their tongue. Seemed they had seen it too; and not very many of them were too pleased about it. Yosuke was out right furious, much like Justin had been. Who would have thought they could agree on anything, let alone the matter of getting credit and attention. After all, Justin just wanted to fit in, to fade away in the crowds; to see him so visibly angered by the prospect of someone riding off of his deeds and his accomplishments, of someone taking the spotlight away from him... It was almost out of character. Kind of reminded him of the day he first moved here, when he transferred in with Yu. He didn’t want attention, yet for some reason, he was really pissed that he had to share the spotlight with Narukami.

“That thing about the Detective Prince solving the case? C'mon, we're the ones who actually caught the killer.” Yosuke shouted with aggravation and annoyance. Justin was only happy to see who wasn’t the only one absolutely infuriated by the Detective Prince taking credit for something she had no role in. It was like watching a great movie, then leaving the theatre and saying ‘yep, if I didn’t eat that subway sandwich a week ago, this movie wouldn’t have been possible.’ I mean, what the fuck? Who was she to take credit for that? She didn’t even do anything!

“I don’t want to brag or anything, but c’mon. That’s bullshit at its finest. She didn’t do a damn thing!” Justin snarled, eyes stooped into a glare. Most of the others nodded in slight agreement, save perhaps Yu and Yukiko. Yu just didn’t see why it was a big deal; they knew what they did, so it didn’t matter if some phony was preaching, trying to take credit where credit was not due. They did a good thing, and because of them, the murders were over with. That was all that mattered in the long run. Yukiko, on the other hand, just didn’t think any of the others were right when they said she played NO part in the investigation. She did do something, even if it wasn’t that much.

“But the police were the ones who identified the suspect, and he was cooperating with them on it, right? So it's true he helped solve the case.” Yukiko reasoned out loud. Justin just threw his hand up and scoffed at the remark. Working with the police does not make her responsible for solving the case by extension. That’s not how it worked. She stood there pointing fingers at people that were actually trying

to help get this case closed and solved instead of doing her damn job. That's not solving the case, that's being an obstructive bitch.

"I'm kinda surprised, though. I didn't think he was the type to go after the spotlight like that." Chie remarked with puzzlement, confused what had pushed Naoto to take credit for something she didn't do. Made you wonder if all the other cases she had solved had gone down the same way; with her simply standing there, then taking credit once the ashes had cooled. Sure looked that way from Justin's point of view anyway. The group was walking forward at the moment, though they all stopped when they heard an all too familiar voice calling them from ahead. None of the group was really watching where they went, so it came as a shock when they were stopped dead in their tracks by Naoto standing there in the middle of the road, blocking their path. It's a shame there were so many witnesses right now, or Justin swore he'd just turn around and deck her square in her smug ass jaw. That'd teach her not to steal from Justin Jeremiah Tylor. But alas, no; they were on the road to school and people were passing left and right. He'd have to restrain himself for now.

"Good morning."

"And speaking of the devil..." Justin groaned as the group slowly came to a stop. She had a lot of balls to take credit for something they did, and then stand here making pleasantries like she hadn't just stole from them. If Justin were Naoto, he would run and never show his face around these parts again, lest she learn about the Trial of the Dragon... Okay, well maybe Chie wouldn't kick her in the face just for stealing the show away from them, but damn, someone had to do SOMETHING to put her in her place. She shouldn't be allowed to get away with this kind of shit.

"I've been waiting for you all. There's something I needed to discuss with you regarding the case." Naoto remarked officious, very serious in tone. She meant business that was for sure. Justin groaned and rolled his eyes, almost tempted to turn around and walk away. He didn't need this bullshit today; they had caught the murderer, and she was STILL going to interrogate them? She was STILL going to point fingers at them for a crime she KNEW they didn't commit? That was where he drew the line. And the worst part is he couldn't just call the cops on her for harassment. She was above the law because of her working relationship with the police. It was utterly disgusting to every nerve in Justin's body.

"Discuss? Dude, we'll be late if we talk too long... Hey, where's your uniform?" Yosuke questioned with annoyance. He wasn't getting another bad mark on his already shitty attendance record just because Naoto wanted to bug them some more on an issue that was long since closed. I mean, what the hell could Naoto possibly have left to ask? What was Mitsuo's favorite color? *Black. Black as his cold, desolate soul. There, happy? Now go home.*

"Could you please indulge my current theory on the matter?" Naoto again requested the cooperation of the investigation team on the matter, hoping for them

to explain some things to her that she just didn't understand. Though maybe if she actually did her job instead of letting everyone do the work for her, she would have been able to figure it out on her own. Justin and Yosuke both crossed their arms, rolling their eyes and groaning. They didn't have time nor patience to deal with Naoto right now, so the sooner she stepped aside, the better.

"What is it...?" The two both groaned in complete synchronization, before passing each other a shocked look. That was weird, and in a way, not entirely pleasant. The thought of the two being on the complete same wavelength in their minds at any given time seemed absolutely horrible to the two of them. "That never happened." Justin dictated, trying to pretend that they hadn't been thinking the same thing. Yosuke could not have argued less with that order if he was given a million dollars and told to go on vacation in the Bermudas.

"First, as regards commonalities between the victims, all of them were kidnapped before they were murdered. The victims were all locals who had been the focus of recent media attention, becoming suddenly well-known... That is the most likely scenario. I don't believe there's anything intrinsically unique about the victims themselves. ...Haven't you all come to the same conclusion?" Naoto laid out her theory before turning this into somewhat of an interrogation session. At first she had simply laid out her own conclusions, but then she suddenly requested to know if the investigation team had come to the same conclusion. Perhaps she was very well aware of the investigation team's role in all of this, perhaps she was just testing the waters. Whatever it was, it was very clearly a trap to get them to admit to their role in the investigation. All they needed to do now was to keep their mouths closed and refuse to answer any questions she may have concerni-

"Yeah, we did."

...

Okay seriously, what the fuck Yu? So basically, Yu decided to not even hide the fact that they clearly knew stuff they shouldn't have known unless they got involved in the investigation. Which for the record, was ENTIRELY illegal, whether they were helping solve the crime or not. She could charge them all with obstruction of justice right now if she so pleased, and all because Yu decided not to lie to the girl who sure as hell had no problems lying to them and the rest of the world about her involvement in the case. Seriously, four simple words. I plead the fifth. That's all he had to say, and it would all be over. No more questions, no more interrogations. Done, they'd be in the clear. But NOOOOOOOOooooooo. Someone had to be all 'oh yeah, we totally know everything about those murders.' Remind Justin again why everyone considered Yu the leader of the bunch. Did the guy even talk enough to warrant that title?

"Then, allow me to state my point. Will you admit that a number of you fit these identical circumstances?" Naoto continued with her interrogation; after all, she did

just get confirmation from Yu that they knew a bunch of shit she clearly did not. Was he trying to make them all late to class.

"We plead the fi--"

"Yes."

"Dammit Yu!" Justin shouted back. What the hell was the matter with this guy today? For starters, didn't he think that information should have been something they decided to share. Justin sure as hell had no intention of letting Naoto know he was one of the victims. He doubted Yukiko and Rise were entirely comfortable with that either, especially after the stuff that had shown up on their show on the midnight channel. Which they somehow doubted Naoto was unaware of at this point. She had clearly started putting the dots together on pretty much everything else. Yu shrugged a bit, clearly not fazed by the fact that he had said WAY too much on the matter. Someone should put a muzzle on him before he kept blabbering.

"There was a long interval between the second and third deaths in this case. But after I applied the aforementioned criteria, I discovered several similar disappearances had taken place. Yukiko Amagi. Kanji Tatsumi. Rise Kujikawa... Justin Tylor, if his absence records are to be considered in correspondence with his appearance on the television." Naoto remarked passing a bit of a glare at Justin. Seemed she had figured out no one had reported him missing, despite the fact that he very much was. But the fact of the matter is, he broke a LOT of the guidelines that the others fit into when they went missing. It was one of the sole reasons she had been so suspicious of him at first. Judging from his character however, and the mere fact that he associated with all of the alleged victims on a regular basis, it seemed he was just an odd exception to the rules. A red herring if you will. It could be that the killer was trying to break the cycle and throw the investigation off.

"For a detective, you sure seem to believe a lot of silly rumors." Justin brushed off her entirely correct deduction by trying to play the Midnight Channel off as nothing as a rumor. He probably shouldn't have been all things considered. After all, if he wasn't on the Midnight Channel, that simply meant he had went missing for a week. And that was definitely suspicious as fuck. Naoto just ignored Justin though; she had seen the channel with her own eyes, he wasn't getting out of it that easily. She was only surprised she was withholding information that was critical to the investigation of a crime that almost lead to his murder. You would think he'd be more cooperative. And he would be, if it were anyone BUT Naoto. He literally had no problem with her up until she made that murder remark about Maya and him; she had brought it on herself that he was being so uncooperative.

"All of you disappeared shortly after being shown on TV... Either you escaped death somehow, or you faked your own disappearances in order to divert attention from yourselves... Since some of you had ties to the victims, there came a point where I suspected one of you must be the culprit." Naoto continued, eyes never really

drawing away from Justin. Oh it was very clear to EVERYONE who Naoto meant when she said she considered one of them to be the killer. And despite the fact that Justin certainly was aggressive, and from an outside perspective, they could definitely see him getting into trouble on a regular basis, none of them would ever consider Justin playing a role in a crime like this. Deep down, he really was a good guy. If you didn't wrong him, if you just treated him as a human being deserving of some respect, he'd return the favor. If you didn't, he'd give your shit right back. After all, he sure as hell didn't want it. Point being, Justin being the killer had never crossed the minds of the investigation team for even a second. Nor would it ever.

"You thought one of us was the killer!? You can't be serious!" Chie shouted with shock and anger. It was one thing to hear from Justin that she had said that to him; but as they all knew, Justin could be a bit of a drama queen, throwing everything out of proportion. He had good intentions when he went into a fit of rage, but even with his intents in mind, he was most certainly an unreliable source of information on matters such as this. Chie gritted her teeth a bit, almost as though angered by the fact that Naoto had been dragging Justin's name through the dirt all this time... A long while ago, and even to this day, Justin had stood up on Chie's behalf when someone tried to drag her to the dirt. She thought it was about time she returned the favor. It was too bad at this point that Justin was taking this all as a joke, not in the slightest bit offended by the comment. He was angry, but not offended.

"Plot twist!" Justin remarked sarcastically, pulling out the jazz hands for a second, wearing a phony grin as though he were putting on a show. After all, this wasn't new information to him, not was it for Chie. And let's face it, none of the others ever doubted who Naoto was referring to in this scenario; which was... kind of disheartening in a way. He was an asshole, but not THAT much of an asshole, I mean, come on! Naoto just shook her head and adjusted her hate, ignoring the overly sarcastic and eccentric gesture. Truth be told, she somewhat suspected his 'sister' more. There was no record of when she had arrived in Inaba, meaning she could have started this spree at any given time, and there had been an increasingly large stack of evidence that could link Maya to the scene of the Burned Man case in California. Nothing conclusive; but it was definitely suspicious anyway. However; considering that Justin was one of the victims, and the two claimed to be brothers and sisters, residing in the same house; that Maya had actually taken a bullet to the gut, and yet no one reported her assaulting or attempting to kidnap someone... It was very unlikely that she would victimize herself or loved ones. She seemed in the clear on the matter of the Hanged Man case. For now anyway.

"This was a prior theory, since discarded. Putting together everything I've learned until this moment, I believe exactly the opposite. You aren't the culprits. You may, in fact, be the only ones with the means to pursue the true perpetrator... Seen as a joining of forces between the rescued, everything falls into place." Naoto began to muse out loud, piecing together the last puzzle pieces. Justin had to do a slow clap,

as though to applaud the last horse crossing the finishing line. That should have been obvious to her almost immediately.

"Now if only you used that detective brain of yours to solve crimes instead of accusing me of murder." Justin remarked sarcastically. He had a rather filthy name he wanted to call her at the end of his little applause, but he figured since she was using her head for once, he'd let it slide this time. If she kept up the good work, maybe she'd get an actual applause one day. Maybe.

"...Of course, this is all speculation. There is in fact a flaw in the theory. It doesn't account for the third incident... Mr. Morooka's murder. He has never been broadcast on television, and neither did he ever disappear. We must also consider the condition of his corpse. The first two victims are still listed with an unknown cause of death... But Mr. Morooka died of an easily identifiable blunt force trauma to the occipital cranium. The police have not satisfactorily resolved this discrepancy, yet they are desperate to close the case." Naoto continued to address her disappointment in the way the case was handled, citing issues she found in the resolution in the case. And it would all be a valid point if they hadn't caught the fucking murderer. He confessed. That's it; it's over. There is NOTHING left to investigate. It doesn't matter why the method changed when the culprit already admitted to committing both crimes.

"Further action...? What do you mean?" Chie questioned, a little curious what she meant by that. Further action? What else was there to do? The murderer was in jail, and the case was closed. She wasn't going to find any more evidence, she wasn't going to make any more deductions. There was nothing left for her to do. That's it, game over. Any more action on her part would be completely and utterly pointless by this point, if she could even do anything else. She probably couldn't.

"Well, whatever the outcome... the evidence should come to light... You said something interesting to me not long ago. This is not a game for me either..." Naoto remarked, before turning about to walk away, a fiery look of determination in her eyes. And she damn well might have just kept walking if Justin didn't call out to her behind, his arms still crossed, an annoyed glance on his face. She thought she was some kind of superhero, but really, she was nothing but another piece in the puzzle.

"Please. It's all a game; and we're all just the pawns." Naoto stopped dead in her tracks, pausing for a moment before turning back around to face Justin.

"Then who's the chess master?"

"Does it really matter?"